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Collecting: A Process of Learning, Growth, and Forming Identity

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Abstract

Why do people stuff their homes full of things that have no real utility and attach such great personal attachment to them? It is the relationships involved in any action that provide a lasting sense of satisfaction. Transformation in life as with education is about being able to sit with uncertainty, asking questions, and seeking to understand with the spirit of earnest curiosity. We should seek to hold each other gently in the uncertainty of learning and growth. What if instead of focusing on rushing to meet standards and goals, we slow down and embrace the process of learning missteps and all? As we go through life we collect experiences and through relationships are gifted pieces of ourselves.

Keyword: collecting, objectives, environmental education, learning, growth

The journey is what brings happiness not the destination. Most people have heard some form of this cliché quote. This iteration comes from a film based on my first favorite book *Way of the Peaceful Warrior* by Dan Millman (2000). The protagonist Dan is a highly successful student athlete at a University in California. Despite his success he is tortured by feelings of emptiness and dissatisfaction with his life. After a curious late night encounter he is sent on a divergent path alongside a gas station attendant who will soon become a mentor. Later in the book after much preparation he is lured by this vexing and mystical mentor on a grueling hike with the promise of some wonderful and cryptic “thing.” A thing he is finally ready to see, a thing that will unveil the key to a satisfying life. This thing he is rushing toward will give Dan the key to happiness. I for one would love to see that thing. Wouldn’t you?

Fueled by the excitement of this promise Dan has a joyous trip up the mountain moving in eager anticipation. After hours of hiking they arrive. Perhaps some of you with heightened intuition can see where this story and hike are headed. That’s right nowhere. Dan’s mentor dragged him up a peak to look at a rock. Not a magic rock that holds the key to life and happiness, just an ordinary rock. This thing he was headed toward was supposed to provide him with the key to a meaningful life. Dan was pissed. I can understand his frustration. If someone dragged me up a mountain just to prove a point I too would be bummed, unless we had an awesome time along the way. That was the lesson nested in this hike after all. The destination is an unknown. How the journey unfolds and the happiness and suffering found along the way exists independent of what is found at the finish line.

In my experience the destination can be a trap. Often when I reach it I find a hollow feeling. What is uncovered is a desire to seek out a new destination to move toward. In reflection on past experiences I never smile brightest when thinking of the rugged peak I bagged, epic line I skied, or any other objective I suffered for. It is the suffering, and with whom I did the suffering that has me beaming with nostalgia. A good trip for me is not measured by whether or not we got to where we were planning. It is measured by the amount of times we were able to laugh at ourselves, if we were able to learn from our missteps, and by how many good stories came from the adventure.

This hunt for the objective is the trap of consumer culture. The trap of obtaining the next thing that will make you happy only for a fleeting moment. What is so important about these material objects that people will stand in line all night for them? Why do people drool over the newest pocket-sized computer despite a fully functioning one they just purchased sitting in their pocket? Why do people stuff their homes full of things that have no real utility and attach such great personal attachment to them?

Obtaining something with the hope the object will provide fulfillment is different from enjoying the act of collecting. In my experience the act of collecting done with intention and perspective can be fulfilling. Know that the thing being collected is not what provides satisfaction. It is the relationships involved in any action that provide a lasting sense of satisfaction. It is the myriad of beings and places one relates to that defines a life. By all means if what brings you fulfillment is the act of collecting a thing then do that. If you like to go out and thrift shop for funny old hats, do that. If you like to collect treasures along the shore of the Salish Sea, do it. If you like to collect records that have never-ending guitar solos performed by Jerry Garcia spiced with the occasional Bob Weir vocalization, do that. Whatever it is you like to do stay cognizant of and tend to the relationships that define the experience you are having.

I got my first Grateful Dead record from my Dad. One day I decided that the old record collection my parents had been lugging around in a box Elvis made in wood shop class in the 80's should be put to good use. For the sake of clarity I should tell you Elvis is what my brother and I affectionately call our dad. Neither Elvis Presley nor his records are relevant to this story.

The time I spent sitting on the floor of my bedroom with Elvis thumbing through his dusty record collection is an experience I cherish. We would pick one out and slap it on the old record player with fraying wires while we sorted. Occasionally we would come across one with my mother's initials inscribed on the cover. I found happiness in the process of organizing and listening to records with my dad. I took that collection out west to college where my friends and I would crank the volume on the stereo system to play music that was recorded long before we were born. I would always be stoked to bike along the Animas River with my housemate up to a now out of business record store to purchase dollar records and trade in the ones I had grown tired of. There were a few community gatherings in our home on Folsom Place with the hole in the kitchen floor. Friends would come in with smiling faces to jubilantly dance around the house while pressing dirt into the rug and causing the needle to skip. The records themselves were

and remain irrelevant. All of these experiences and relationships satisfied me in a way that clutching tightly my favorite Dead record alone in my room could never provide. The records are objects that represent moments in my life that were significant and formative for one reason or another. I am as much a collector of experiences as I am of records.

If 16-year-old me had been told that one day he would love psychedelic rock with long wandering guitar riffs he would have laughed with the firm assertion that he would only ever be interested in New York Hip Hop. How then did we get here? For some reason I was able to enter into this world of music that was unfamiliar. In her book “A Field Guide to Getting Lost” Rebecca Solnit writes,

The things we want are transformative, and we don't know or only think we know what is on the other side of that transformation. Love, wisdom, grace, inspiration-how do you go about finding these things that are in some ways about extending the boundaries of the self into unknown territory, about becoming someone else? (2006)

As I read that statement and think about what it means to “extend the boundaries of the self into unknown territory” (Solnit, 2006), I begin to consider all of the relationships that must be cultivated. In fact I believe that the very act of cultivating and embracing my own interrelatedness is what will lead me to a meaningful life that I am unable to fully envision at this moment. A meaningful life defined by the relationships I hold dear and the experiences we share grounded in community.

Transformation in life as with education is about being able to sit with uncertainty, asking questions, and seeking to understand with the spirit of earnest curiosity. In a speech offered at Naropa University Parker Palmer said,

...Clinging to what you already know and do well is the path to an unlived life, so cultivate beginners mind walk straight into your not knowing and take the risk of failing and falling again and again then getting up again and again to learn. That is the path to a life lived large in service of love truth and justice. (2015)

As an educator I feel I must always work to cultivate this mentality for myself, while catalyzing the co-creation of a learning space defined by this with students. Life is a never-ending learning experience. Each of us came to be who we are today because we were at one point open and willing to fail and learn. Nobody stood up and ran across the room the first time they tried to walk. We trusted those around us to help us grow through our missteps. Now every time we walk, the hands that guided our first steps continue to shape how we move through the world. In this way we come to be defined by our relationality. We must create trust among the people in our communities. We should seek to hold each other gently in the uncertainty of learning and growth. I wish to do the work of holding a space amidst experience where students can be authentically

themselves in the pursuit of learning. This is my main focus and what I consider to be my greatest responsibility.

I spent last summer serving as an educator on wilderness trips for high school aged youth aimed at developing leadership skills and engagement with public lands. One of our adventures was exceedingly demanding in many ways for all of the people involved. We were faced with challenging social dynamics, physically and mentally exhausting conditions, and heinous swarms of mosquitoes. I grappled with my mind constantly on the trip wondering if I was doing enough as an instructor. I spent time puzzling over what more I could do to create the space students needed to step into uncertainty. I felt I was falling short. I had many late night conversations with my co-leads discussing strategies we might be able to use to refocus the intentions of our newly formed community.

On this expedition I met a young woman whom I frequently think about when I consider what education is for, what it can look like, and what marks successful educational experiences. On the first night of the trip this young woman's arms and legs were swollen and covered in insect bites. She had no previous experience in the backcountry. On the final evening of the trip, our last night in the backcountry, she told me that prior to now she never considered herself an outdoorsy person. She did not identify with the natural world or the outdoor recreation community. She told me that this trip helped alter that perspective. It helped shape her own vision of who she could be and where she belonged. She now had ambitions of thru-hiking the Pacific Crest Trail.

I do not think her journey and where she ended up should be the standard by which I measure every youth educational experience I may facilitate in the future. I do not want every young person to walk away from an environmental education program and commit to thru hiking. I believe the goal should be to always act in a way that allows for folks to have those transformative experiences, wherever they may lead. I am certain there is more I could have done as an instructor, mentor, and leader on that trip. That is what makes it a successful trip for me as an educator. I did what I could in the moment and am now able to learn from it. Despite all of the challenges we faced as a community on that journey, I am able to categorize it a success because I know that at least a couple people walked away with significant experiences that altered the way they view the world and their own ever-evolving purpose within it.

A 22-year-old Hunter S. Thompson once wrote a letter to a friend of his who was seeking advice on how to find a meaningful and purposeful life. He wrote,

Every [person] is the sum total of [their] reactions to experience. As your experiences differ and multiply, you become a different [person], and hence your perspective changes. This goes on and on. Every reaction is a learning process; every significant experience alters your perspective. (2017)

Education should be a series of meaningful experiences. The reactions students have to those experiences change how they view the world. How can we reimagine education in such a way that allows folks to grow into the best version of themselves? What is the goal of mainstream education, as it exists today? Is it to teach people how to take tests? Is it to make as many people as possible select the right answer when asked a question? Is it to mold minds that have the capacity to regurgitate facts read from a textbook? Is it to make sure everyone knows how to properly cite an article in APA format?

I believe the fixation on ensuring students learn the right answer has stigmatized being wrong to the point where there is a fear of trying new things and a hindrance to learning. I was petrified of being wrong in grade school. I never wanted to be called on to offer an answer. Nothing was worse than putting myself out there with an answer or an opinion and being wrong or off topic or different or weird. I want to counteract these forces to free up young minds to act and react with experiences that allow for change and growth. I want to belong to a group of learners that care for their community members in a way that is transparent and emboldens each individual to try and fail and learn and grow.

Those in the audience that know me know that I love to ski. I love everything about it. It is an integral part of my identity. In my experience it is commonplace to hoot and holler with excitement when a friend has a dramatic wipe out and sends pieces of gear flying in every direction. When someone drops a huge cliff the instinctive vocalization that flies out of my mouth is even more pronounced when they fail to ride away gracefully. I am not jeering or shaming them. I am celebrating their willingness to push the envelope and am in awe of their effort. They are brave enough to literally plunge into the unknown and I want to support and celebrate them regardless of the outcome. It is the best feeling in the world to ski up to your friends and be greeted with smiles and high fives even though things did not quite work out as you had hoped.

Sure hucking yourself off of a cliff may be deemed as risky behavior. Life is inherently risky and if we are not willing to take risks we are edging toward what is perhaps the greatest risk of all. We run the risk of living stagnantly, getting stuck in the rut that keeps us firmly planted in our comfort zones waiting to die and far away from transformation, growth, and learning. Risk can be managed. If there is one thing I have learned it is that if you are considering jumping off the cliff make sure you think about the conditions first. Check to see if there is plenty of fresh powder to soften the impact if things go awry. Surround yourself with friends who are prepared to help you pick up the pieces and make sense of what just happened.

Practicing humility as a facilitator and cultivating a learning community that embraces humility as a practice can serve students and the communities they belong to. I want to take youth out of the classroom and supplement the learning that takes place in-between the hard covers of a 400-page black and white textbook. What would happen if we slowed down the process of education? What if we practiced gathering perspectives and sought to understand by connecting with folks in our community? We can learn through the offering of our own perspective and listening with intention to people who

are working to sustain a healthy community. As an educator I need to be able to admit when I do not know something rather than just filling space with conjecture. In this way students can see in practice the power behind acknowledging the limits of understanding. Decentering myself as a source of knowledge and encouraging each individual to share what they know in their mind and their heart. I myself am a lifelong learner and want to approach the facilitation of experience with humility.

What if instead of focusing on rushing to meet standards and goals, we slow down and embrace the process of learning missteps and all? What if we are able to celebrate mistakes and learn with a perspective that treats mistakes as beautiful opportunities for growth? Not every lesson, every month, year, or decade will have a neat and tidy conclusion that we will be able to hang our hat on and proclaim that we have checked all the boxes and met our objectives and accomplished our goals.

I think I love listening to wandering guitar solos because it feels like the artist is exploring the instrument in a way that makes the passage of time and any real commitment to finding a clean conclusive summary of the situation irrelevant. They are creating an experience that is uniquely influenced and contextualized by the previous notes and the link with the audience in that moment.

Some of the most dedicated Dead Heads who traveled around and went to as many live Grateful Dead performances as possible would make tape recordings of these concerts. No two Dead shows are alike. Each tape represents a unique experience shared by the people in attendance. Why would people so passionately preserve and collect these recordings? I think it is the same reason people collect souvenirs, knickknacks, photographs, driftwood, and rocks. It is why people line window sills with little treasures and trinkets they have gathered. The things you choose to pack into your home are irrelevant. It is the sentimental value and the meaning behind the things that is important.

If I am a collector of anything it is of experiences and relationships. I was talking over the phone with an old friend of mine from early childhood the other day. We were catching up discussing where we were at in life, our aspirations, and how despite our divergent paths we have stayed in touch through the years. He said that when he was on his deathbed that the only things he will be thinking about are his friends, family, and the things he has done with those people he loves.

According to the keeper of all knowledge Wikipedia (2019), education is defined as “the process of facilitating learning, or the acquisition of knowledge, skills, values, beliefs, and habits.” I would say that education is a never-ending process through which we continually redefine how we relate to the world and thereby grow and learn more about ourselves (Appendix A). No one is self-made. No one can pull themselves up by their bootstraps. No one can grow in isolation. As we go through life we collect experiences and through relationships are gifted pieces of ourselves.

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Appendix A. Activity script that incorporates themes discussed in this paper.

This activity will involve a small amount of walking and we will be standing for the next 15 to 20 minutes. If you would feel more comfortable sitting that will be fine, there are a handful of chairs already out there and if we need more we can make that accommodation.

Hello everyone! Now that we are all out here I will explain what we are about to do. After I am done if anything is unclear please ask questions, because chances are I did not explain clearly and that the person standing next to you has the same question. This activity is designed to allow us an opportunity to consider and embody our own interrelatedness and the relational nature of our experiences.

In just a moment the first thing I want you all to do is meander around this space with no real set direction or pattern. Please stay within this general area up here. Wander around and weave your way through the crowd. While you walk around this space stare down only at your own feet. Do not look up at anyone else. Do not look off into the distance only stare down. Please remain silent. If you accidentally bump into someone do not look up, and do not apologize just keep moving. Continue to walk around this space until I say otherwise. As you are doing this please listen for my voice because I will change the rules as we go. Does anyone have any questions before we begin?

Okay, you all may lower your heads look down at your feet and begin wondering around through the crowd. (Wait 1 minute)

Continue walking and pick your head up. Begin to make eye contact with those you pass by. Feel free to nod your head in acknowledgement of their presence. (Wait 1 minute)

Continue walking and acknowledging one another. Now you can give out high fives, or fist bumps. (Wait 1 minute)

Keep going and high-fiving; now add in your voice. Say hello, what's up, or however else you may greet a friend! (Wait 1 minute)

Now freeze! I am hoping you all will allow me to guide you through a brief meditation. This will be an opportunity to envision the nature of your relationality. If you want to stay where you are standing that works. If you want to sit down where you are or find a place to be comfortable within earshot that is fine with me. There are sit pads here is this bucket, and a few chairs around feel free to use one. This will only take a couple of minutes.

I invite you all to close your eyes if you feel comfortable. Settle into your body and begin to draw your attention inward. Bring your awareness to your breath. Inhale deeply. Exhale slowly, and again, inhale, exhale. As you continue to breathe, picture a person you

know well and trust. Someone who you feel has been integral in your life. Picture someone whose path has been interwoven with your own.

Consider the journey this physical form you are envisioning has been on... from the womb of their mother, to learning how to crawl, walk, and then run. Think of all of the places they have been as they grew... the many miles they have walked over their lifetime. How many other beings has this human come into contact with? How many times have they offered their hand to another... placing that hand on a loved one's shoulder to comfort, helping someone off the ground who could no longer bear the weight they carry on their own.

Contemplate the vast number of dreams they have had since their inception on earth... The dreams they have had and then forgotten, the dreams that recurred many times, the daydreams they spun for themselves, the dreams they fixed their mind on and have since actualized.

At some moment during their journey you arrived in their life. For each other you brought many gifts... offering yourselves you began to influence one another. You shared experiences that changed how you view the world... you laughed together, you shared moments of pain and anguish. The very nature of your relationship, the space you hold and tend to between you, added another piece to your own identities.

As you open your eyes recognize the people in this space all have relationships like the one you just envisioned. Each of us is so deeply entwined that what you are seeing around you is the mere physical manifestation of a lifetime of relationships. As Shawn Wilson writes:

"What you see is their physical form, but you realize that this form is really just a web of relationships that have taken on a familiar shape. Every individual thing you see around you is really just a huge knot--- a point where thousands and millions of relationships come together. These relationships come to you from the past, from the present, and from your future. This is what surrounds us, and what forms us, our world, our cosmos and our reality. We could not *be* without *being in relationship* with everything that surrounds us and is within us. Our reality, our ontology is the relationships." (2004)

I believe that as we continue to learn and grow throughout the rest of our lives we should work to ensure that those people who help define us, and how we move through life know how important they are. We can strive to build relationships with beings we do not yet intimately know. We can practice seeing strangers as having the potential to alter our own existence by sharing who they are with us. As we build relationships that are mutually supportive and transformative we open the door to continually becoming what we aspire to be. We move toward a more fulfilling life that we cannot actualize and fully envision without stepping bravely into the unknown.